University of Chester

Department of English

MA Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture

EN7204 Dissertation

2014-2015

The Representation of Female Prostitution in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Literature

J18109

An Abstract

This dissertation discusses the representation of female prostitution in Victorian and Neo-Victorian literature by analysing the following texts: *Oliver Twist, Mary Barton, The Crimson Petal and the White* and *Mrs Warren's Profession.* It analyses the stereotypical figure of the nineteenth century prostitute and looks beyond this representation by exploring image, maternity, female friendship and biblical symbols. The dissertation considers prostitution in Victorian culture as well as literature, and uses contemporaneous sources such as letters from Charles Dickens, newspaper articles and artwork in order to reinforce ideas. Ultimately the dissertation attempts to determine whether the prostitute was a powerful or a powerless figure by comparing the prostitutes in all four texts to each other and to their 'respectable' sisters.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my friends and family for their support and interest. I would also like to thank the module tutors for all of their help, and my dissertation tutor for her advice and enthusiasm.

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Introduction

An Overview of Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Society

Prostitution is a trade that dates back to before the bible, but it was not until the nineteenth century that it was considered a serious threat that could affect the nation not only socially and morally, but physically. Syphilis and other such diseases associated with prostitution were becoming common, affecting not only men, but women and children. By 1857 there was an apparent 8600 known prostitutes living in London, but rumours were circulating that the number of 'loose women' roaming the streets of the city was actually closer to 80,000. 'The Great Social Evil' it seemed, was becoming a vast unmanageable problem and action needed to be taken immediately.

In 1840 'The Brothels Suppression Bill' was introduced to parliament, followed in 1848 by the 'Bill for the Protection of Females', both of which failed. It was not until 1864 that the first act against prostitution was passed. The infamous 'contagious diseases acts' of 1864, 1866 and 1869 all differed slightly in their forms of legislation, but the aims remained the same: abolish venereal disease. The acts allowed for the arrest of any prostitute, or possible prostitute. The police relied on certain indicators of 'guilt' to help them decide who was a suspect. Popular indicators included: residence in a brothel, frequenting the streets, being informed against by soldiers or sailors, or the admission of the woman herself. Once arrested the women were to be examined for any possible traces of sexual disease, and if found, they were detained until cured. The acts caused uproar amongst feminist movements who protested and fought to have them abolished. One of the movement leaders, Josephine Butler, highlighted the 'double standards' that the acts commended: 'By this law a crime has been created in order that it may be severely punished, but observe, that has been ruled to be a crime in women, which is not a crime in men'.[1] The idea that a man taking advantage of the prostitute's services was 'natural', even though 'the woman who provided the service was wicked'[2] was scorned and ridiculed by the movement, until the act was finally repealed in 1886 due to the unjust treatment of females.

[1] Josephine Butler in A.N Wilson, 'Goblin Market and the Cause' in *The Victorians* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003) p309

[2] A.N Wilson, 'The Fourth Estate' in *The Victorians* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003) p473

The ‘contagious diseases acts’ and the arguments raised regarding ‘double standards’ led some members of society to develop a slightly different opinion of prostitution. Evidence of this can be seen by looking at two contemporary to the nineteenth century newspapers. On October the 22nd 1838 an article criticizing the promiscuity of the prostitute was published in the Hampshire Telegraph: ‘Of all the material evils by which society is disgraced, profligacy in females is confessedly one of the most fatal […] in women licentiousness involves the abandonment of all that is correct in principle and desertion by all those who are respectable in character’.[3] The prostitute is here portrayed as a degraded and immoral being, that corrupts those around her, but in W.T Stead’s famous article: ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ the prostitute is represented as the victim and it is those who use her that are ‘disgraced’. Stead argues that the trade is a crime in its violation of women, some of which are young enough to be considered children, and it is the trade that is the problem, not the prostitute herself: ‘That is what I call sexual criminality as opposed to sexual immorality’.[4] The articles have very different views on prostitution, and it could be suggested that this is due to the year in which each was written. The first article in the Hampshire Telegraph was published in 1838, whilst the second ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ was published almost fifty years later in 1885 after the movements against the ‘contagious diseases acts’, suggesting they were effective in changing the views of many. However even at the end of the nineteenth century, there was an ongoing debate on prostitution, and whilst many now considered prostitutes to be victims of a cruel society and time, others still believed they were dirty, sinful and harmful to the population.

Whatever the debate on prostitution, she was still a figure who failed to meet both social and gender ideals. She was an outsider who moved beyond the strict confines of what was socially acceptable in Victorian society. Historian Judith Wallowitz looks at the account of a rescue worker who describes the typical characteristics of a ‘streetwalker’: ‘[…]A wild, impulsive nature, a restlessness and a desire for independence frequently characterized the young woman who moved into prostitution’.[5] This description conjures up the image of a woman who seeks opportunity and financial independence, which leads us to the valid question: why did prostitution exist? Tom Winnifrith, a nineteenth century literature critic,

[3] The Hampshire Telegraph, October 1838 [Accessed April 2015] http://www.dickens.port.ac.uk/-the-woman-question /

[4] W.T. Stead, ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’, *The Pall Mall Gazette,* July 6 1885 p14

[5] A nineteenth century rescue work in Judith Wallowitz, ‘The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain’ in Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State’ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p20

claims there is a general supposition that: 'Prostitutes thrived in Victorian times because young men were thwarted of their sexual outlets by Virginal creatures',[6] and suggestions as to why women actually moved into prostitution included degeneracy, immorality, sexual desire and poverty. Elizabeth Wolstenholme, a nineteenth century feminist and activist in the movements taking place believed the reason for prostitution to be the latter suggestion: '[…] women who are driven to this unhappy life in most cases by sheer poverty'.[7] Wolstenholme is here suggesting that the women had no other choice but to turn to prostitution, but Wallowitz's reference to Reverend Horsley's work in 1882 proposes that women willingly entered into the trade. Horsley interviewed prostitutes confined in Millbank prison and claimed that: '14,000 out of 16,000 prostitutes indicated they were led away by such allurements as: 'nothing to do; plenty of money; your own mistress; perfect liberty'.[8] The nineteenth century was a period in which opportunities for women were limited, and besides factory work or service, there were few other ways for a single woman to earn money. Prostitution offered shorter hours, better pay and less labour: 'In many working class districts women were prepared to take the risk of catching venereal diseases since unlike their 'respectable' sisters they could afford rooms of their own, new clothes, heat, cooked food and above all alcohol'.[9] Prostitution was considered by some a short term solution to end poverty. It was an opportunity, and many women even relocated in order to gain better business: 'The lure of London was apparently strong among prostitutes, as a haven from police harassment and as the place where the most money could be made'.[10] The trade may have had a financial appeal for some, but for others it was a dire necessity, and rather than offering opportunity, it offered a life of vulnerability, self- loathing and slavery, as will be discussed in this dissertation. The next three chapters will focus on the representation of prostitution in both Victorian and Neo-Victorian literature, comparing and contrasting the lifestyles and situations of various characters.

Chapter one will analyse Esther in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and Nancy in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist.* The chapter will focus on the image of the prostitute and characteristics associated with her. The chapter will discuss the maternal side of Esther and

[6] Tom Winnifrith, 'Dickens' in *The Fallen Women in the Nineteenth Century* (London: St Martin's Press, 1994) p95
[7] Elizabeth Wolstenholme in Phillipa Levine, 'Marriage and Morality' in *Victorian feminism 1850-1900* (Florida: The University of Florida, 1994) p129
[8] Judith Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' in Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p21
[9] A.N Wilson, 'Goblin Market and the Cause' p310
[10] Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p23

Nancy, concentrating on Esther's relationship with her own child and Nancy's feelings towards Oliver. Letters from Dickens regarding his interest in reformation will be analysed in the last section of this chapter, which will look at the redemption of 'fallen women' and whether Dickens' and Gaskell's own feelings towards the trade of prostitution effect their portrayals of Nancy and Esther.

Modern literary critic Louisa Hadley writes that: 'It is not only in its presentation of sex that Neo-Victorian fiction is more frank than Victorian fiction, but also in its treatment of issues such as homosexuality, abortion and contraception which would been considered taboo'.[11] For this reason chapter two will focus on Michel Faber's Neo-Victorian novel *The Crimson Petal and the White.* As a revisionist text it presents the typically marginalised character of the prostitute with a voice, and allows us to consider aspects of Victorian society generally not included in nineteenth century literature. The chapter will analyse many of the prostitutes within the novel including Sugar, Caroline and Amy. It will explore religion, maternity and female comradery.

Chapter three will bring all three of these texts together and introduce *Mrs Warren's Profession* by George Bernard Shaw to argue whether the prostitute was a figure who was independent and in control of her situation, or whether she was subject to patriarchal forces. The chapter will compare and contrast the prostitutes with each other as well as the 'pure' women in the novels such as Agnes and Rose Maylie.

The dissertation will consider the many different faces of the prostitute, from the pitiful figure of the homeless 'streetwalker' to the highly priced, exotic brothel 'whores'. It will show how the prostitute differed from the ideal Victorian woman by looking at key nineteenth century society issues such as, religion, maternity, image and female friendship. Throughout the debate as to whether the prostitute was in fact a figure of power or a slave to patriarchal society will be central.

[11] Louisa Hadley, 'Narrating the Victorians' in *'Neo Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us'* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p47

Chapter One

Prostitution in *Mary Barton* and *Oliver Twist*

The Stereotypical Image and Characteristics of the Prostitute

Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb claims that there were only two types of women considered in Victorian society: 'Sexless ministering angels or sensuously oversexed temptresses of the devil'.[12] The 'oversexed temptresses of the devil' or prostitutes, as we more commonly know them were: 'the only public face of Victorian sexual activity outside marriage',[13] and it was therefore important that men could easily differentiate them from other women. Prostitutes identified themselves not only by the way they dressed but also through certain habits and mannerisms. This section of the chapter will focus on the stereotypical image and characteristics of the nineteenth century prostitute, comparing to the literary figures of Nancy and Esther.

In *Mary Barton* Esther is immediately recognized as a prostitute by John Barton due to her choice of attire: 'He turned and saw, even by the darkness visible of that badly lighted street, that the woman who stood by him was of no doubtful profession. It was told by her faded finery, all unfit to meet the pelting of that pitiless storm: the gauze bonnet once pink, now dirty white, the muslin gown, all draggled; and soaking wet up to the very knees; the gay coloured barege shawl, closely wrapped about the form […]'[14] Similarly in *Oliver Twist* Nancy is known to be a prostitute from the first glance. She is not acting any differently to the average working woman when she arrives at the inn requesting an audience with Rose, but is

[12] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-moralisation of Society: from Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (London: Palgrave, 1995) p74

[13] Suzanne Fagance Cooper, 'Myth and Reality' in *The Victorian Woman* (London: VA Publication, 2001) p30

[14] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2012) p116 For all further references see the body of the text.

soon judged because of her appearance: 'The young woman, who had, by this time noted her appearance, replied only by a look of disdain'.[15] Judith Wallowitz discusses the nineteenth century prostitute and the deliberate choice to wear such garments in order to be recognised: 'As 'outcast women' prostitutes banded together and adopted an outward appearance […] the dress code of prostitutes also served as a way of advertising themselves and attracting male customers. Bonnet-less without shawls, they presented themselves in 'their figure' to the passer-by'.[16] The typical attire of the prostitute is comparable to a uniform, because as well as identifying the women there was a practical reason in presenting themselves 'bonnet-less without shawls'. Less clothing meant more flesh on display which was a deliberate act in order to entice men and encourage business. Certainly Esther seems to be aware that the clothing she wears associates her with the trade, as she purposely chooses the simplest items she owns in order to meet John Barton: '[…] most of all he loathed the dress; and yet the poor thing, out of her little choice of attire, had put on the plainest she had, to come on that night's errand'. (p.116). The fact that Esther is trying to hide her situation by changing her clothing implicates that she is ashamed, however Wallowitz argues that the nineteenth century prostitute was proud of her position in society: 'To these women, flaunting it 'first rate' undoubtedly signified status, autonomy and freedom from the workaday world of their respectable sisters'.[17] Wallowitz suggests that the prostitute wished to emphasise her involvement in the trade. Nancy and Esther however seem embarrassed and disgraced by their situation throughout the novels, Esther claiming she is: 'the abandoned polluted outcast', (p.220). and Nancy describing herself as a 'degraded being'. (p.367). The characters may wear the typical 'uniform' of the prostitute in order to be identified and attract business, but

[15] Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1992) p365 For all further references see the body of the text.
[16] Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain'p26
[17] Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p28

there certainly appears to be no desire to flaunt 'signified status' or 'freedom' through their dress.

As well as clothing the prostitute could be recognized by a thick application of make up: 'Much was like the gay creature of former years; but the glaring paint, the sharp features, the changed expression on the whole'! (p.116). John Barton immediately notices the 'paint' on Esther's face which reinforces her involvement in prostitution. There are comments made throughout the text concerning Esther's appearance before taking 'the pathway to vice'. (p.219). For instance Mary Barton remembers the way her Aunt looked before her disappearance: 'The face was so different from the old recollections of her Aunt's fresh, dazzling beauty'. (p.222). The idea that Esther was once 'fresh faced' suggests that prostitution has taken its toll and rather than hiding her imperfections the make-up she now wears highlights them. The verse entitled 'Streetwalker' which introduces chapter fourteen in *Mary Barton* describes the decay of a tree: 'Look on this tree- 'twas green, and fair and graceful; Yet now save these few shoots, how dry and rotten'! (p.148). The description of the tree symbolises the loss of Esther's good looks. She may once have been a 'fresh, dazzling beauty' but the trade of prostitution has worn her down, stolen the goodness from her, and she is no longer natural, having become 'dry' and 'rotten' with time.

William Acton, a Victorian doctor of gynaecology however, claimed that the prostitute was not always falsely painted with make-up, and could in fact be viewed as natural and beautiful: 'The dirty, intoxicated slattern in tawdry finery and an inch thick in paint is long a conventional symbol of prostitution […] she was in fact generally pretty and elegant-often painted by nature than by art'.[18] Certainly Dickens' first description of Nancy is not particularly negative: 'They were not exactly pretty perhaps; but they had a great deal of

[18] William Acton, 'Causes of Prostitution' in *Prostitution considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities* (London: Lane Medical Library: 1857) p27

colour in their faces and looked quite stout and hearty. Being remarkably free and easy in their manners, Oliver thought them very nice girls indeed'. (p.77). Although it could be argued that 'colour in their faces' refers to make-up or paint, Dickens does not portray it as having a negative impact on the appearance of the girls. Instead he describes them as 'hearty' and healthy not 'rotten'. There are many different opinions on the appearance of the prostitute and a variety of these representations can be seen through nineteenth century art. Two of these pieces of art can be found in the appendices. Appendix one: 'The Dancing Platform at Cremorne Gardens' created by Phoebus Levin in 1864 depicts London's pleasure gardens which: 'provided the backdrop for much overt prostitution as well as less clearly defined fast behaviour'.[19] This painting shows a variety of different women, but to the right are a crowd of men surrounding what appear to be two very comfortable women. The women wear flamboyant but cheap looking clothing, their positions too relaxed to be considered appropriate for a Victorian lady. Their dresses, relaxed positions and comfortable attitudes towards the men immediately inform us that they are prostitutes. The women in the centre of the painting are 'respectable' ladies, and a clear contrast can be made between the two groups. The clothing of the women in the centre is far more lavish, and whilst the prostitute is relaxed and at ease in the company of the men, the 'respectable' women stand demurely. Rossetti's painting 'Aurelia' created in 1863-73 also portrays a prostitute, but this woman does not appear to have the stereotypical characteristics or dress as in Levin's painting. She sits alone in what can be imagined is a quiet setting. Her long hair is loose, her face is natural, and she wears a plain white dress symbolising purity. The fact that these paintings were created in approximately the same decade suggests that the image of the prostitute could differ, and reinforces Acton's point that 'the prostitute was not always falsely painted with make-up' as stereotyped.

[19] Suzanne Fagance Cooper, 'Myth and Reality' p32

Besides the stereotypical image, there were other things that differentiated nineteenth century prostitutes from other Victorian women, a key difference being their association with alcohol and their tendency to loiter in and around public houses. Contemporary writer J Miller wrote in 1859: 'A woman who drinks will do anything'.[20] Certainly it could be argued that alcohol played a great part in prostitution. Many women originally 'fell' because they were intoxicated, or continued working in the trade because of their need for drink. Esther admits that she is addicted to alcohol and feels she cannot re-enter society as a 'good' woman because of her uncontrollable need for it: 'I tell you, I cannot. I could not lead a virtuous life if I would. I would only disgrace you […] I must have drink. Such as live like me could not bear life if they did not drink. It's the only thing to keep us from suicide. If we did not drink we could not stand the memory of what we have been, and the thought of what we are for a day'. (p.154) Earlier in the novel Esther is arrested by a policeman who believes that she is intoxicated: 'A policeman came up in time to see the close of these occurrences, and concluding from Esther's unsteady, reeling fall, that she was tipsy, he took her in her half-conscious state to the lock ups for the night'. (p.117) This scene emphasises the idea that prostitutes were known for their alcohol addiction, as the policeman does not consider another explanation for Esther's weak state and immediately concludes that she is 'tipsy'. Similarly Nancy is often linked to alcohol: 'Nancy's appearance gave a new turn to the conversation. For the boys, receiving a sly wink from the wry old Jew, began to ply her with liquor'. (p.355) Nancy accepts the alcohol she is plied with, and later blames her drinking habit on the men that surround her. When accused of being drunk she claims: 'You'd never have me anything else- if you had your will'! (p.357). There are many ways in which prostitution can be linked to alcohol. Easy business for prostitutes could usually be found outside and inside drinking houses because drunk men were freer with their money, lustful and more gullible to a

[20] J Miller, *Prostitution Considered in Relation to its Cause and Cure* (Edinburgh: Sutherland & Knox, 1859) p103

'streetwalkers' feigned compliments. As Esther commented, alcohol could also be associated with prostitution in that it was a form of escape from the dark realities of the trade.

Certainly an addiction to alcohol was an associated feature of a stereotypical nineteenth century prostitute, as was a fiery, passionate nature. Prostitutes were often seen as 'wild' women, and unlike the idealised 'well behaved' women in Victorian society, they could be prone to fits of uncontrollable anger or emotion, as is demonstrated by Nancy: 'The girl stamped her foot violently on the floor as she vented this threat; and with her lips compressed and her hands clenched, looked alternately at the Jew and the other robber, her face quite colourless from the passion of rage into which she had gradually worked herself '. (p.142) Literary critic Brenda Ayres comments on the Victorian perception of passion: 'In the Victorian cannon, passion and sex are closely related and they equate to insanity and animalism […] Nancy represents behaviour that is unacceptable for an ideologically correct woman'.[21] This idea can also be linked to Esther however. Whilst in prison Esther can be heard making: 'half delirious wails and moanings […]'. (p.117) She is passionate about saving Mary and as a result sounds almost 'insane', this sort of passion would not be associated with the typical marginalised character of the Victorian woman. Esther describes her own nature as: 'violent and unregulated', (p.220) as though she is a wild beast, an obvious link to Ayres' comment on 'animalism'.

Overall the nineteenth century prostitute was typically a woman who subverted convention. Her image and behaviour highlighted and linked her to the trade which was essential if she was to achieve her ultimate aim: making money. Of course, not all prostitutes were the same and it is important to remember that the above characteristics of the prostitute are a broad Victorian stereotype. The next section of the chapter will focus on Nancy and

[21] Brenda Ayres, 'Passionate and Contained Women of *Oliver Twist*' in *Dissenting Women in Dickens' Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (London: Greenwood Press, 1998) p135

Esther and qualities they possess which would not have been considered typical 'prostitute behaviour' in Victorian society.

The Prostitute as a Maternal Figure

Stereotypically nineteenth century prostitutes were portrayed as unfeeling women. A stereotype which modern literature critic Jennifer Hedgecock reinforces: 'The prostitute was a woman who, as a consequence of her fall, developed a vengeful spirit'.[22] The prostitute was portrayed as unfeeling because she performed what society considered an act of love for the sake of money, and sacrificed the opportunity to have a marriage and children. This was a concept that was considered unnatural for a woman, whose main role was to give birth and care for her offspring. If a prostitute did become pregnant it was usually considered an accident and the child did not live long due to the diseases the mother had contracted. If the child happened to survive it was generally disposed of. Wallowitz discusses this: '[…] venereal disease caused sterility and miscarriages and sickly children who died in infancy […] Prostitutes boarded their children out, left them in the workhouse, or employed contraception, abortion and infanticide to control their fertility. On the basis of this information, it is possible to identify the dominant social characteristics of women who moved into prostitution in the nineteenth century'.[23] Wallowitz is suggesting that the prostitute was void of any maternal feelings, however in *Oliver Twist* and *Mary Barton* both Esther and Nancy clearly display signs of maternal love. This section will explore the relationships between Nancy and Oliver and Esther, her own child and Mary, aiming to prove that prostitutes were not necessarily the 'vengeful', none maternal figures that are stereotypically portrayed.

[22] Jennifer Hedgecock, 'Mid-century Debate on the Representation of Victorian Women' in *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and Sexual Threat* (New York: Cambria Press, 2008) p78
[23] Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p19

In *Mary Barton* it is Esther's love for her child that originally forces her into prostitution: 'Oh […] her moans, her moans, which money could give means of relieving! So I went out into the street one January night- do you think God will punish me for that'? (p.152). Esther's child is dying and she needs money quickly. As her child is ill she will also need many spare hours to care for her, which factory work does not offer. This leaves her with limited choice. Nineteenth century historian Frances Finnegan claims that the urgent need for money in order to support offspring was actually a common reason for women to take to the streets: '[…] some women had children after they entered prostitution and older women- often deserted wives or widows- were known to go on the streets to support their children'.[24] Esther is willing to sacrifice her health, dignity and position in society in order to save her child, revealing how strong her maternal feelings are. After the death of her child and many years of suffering on the street Esther holds no grudge and does not blame her child, she still clearly adores and considers the child, even as she is dying: 'She held the locket containing her child's hair still in her hand, and once or twice she kissed it with a long, soft kiss'. (p.365). It could be argued that Esther is maternal because she had her child before she turned to prostitution. However Esther's affection and compassion are still evident after many years of being in the trade, as can be seen through her feelings toward Mary, a child that is not even her own. Esther is aware that she is nearing the end of her life, and her last act is to save her young niece from the same fate as her: 'It was enough to fill her mind to think of what she might have saved Mary by securing the paper'. (p.220). Esther is frightened and ashamed to reveal her situation to those who knew her in the past, but she is willing to overcome her fears in her urgency to save Mary. The fact that she puts Mary before herself highlights her motherly instinct. Although Esther may love and protect her niece, she is unable to show her any physical affection: 'Her Aunt pushed her off with a frantic kind of gesture, and saying the

[24] Frances Finnegan, 'The Prostitutes and Brother Keepers' in *Poverty and Prostitution: A study of Victorian Prostitutes in York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) p85

words ‘Not me. You must never kiss me. You!’’ (p.226). This could be seen as an example of why prostitutes were often considered unfeeling: their lack of physical contact with anyone but paying customers. Throughout the novel however Esther considers herself unclean and contagious like a ‘leper’ (p.149). which is why she most likely does not want to touch her beloved Mary. She believes she will pass on her ‘sins’ and contaminate Mary’s goodness.

Nancy in *Oliver Twist* does not have a child of her own but her relationship with Oliver certainly reveals a maternal side. Nancy is fond of Oliver from their first meeting, and although she is vastly outnumbered by the dangerous men that surround her, she plots and fights for his survival throughout. Ayres’ argues that the love Nancy evidently feels for Oliver is simply expected because she is a woman: ‘The text never successfully moves past external appearances to get to the heart of a woman like Nancy. Her goodness is a gendered goodness’.[25] Certainly there is evidence in the novel that Nancy is not highlighted as a ‘good’ individual, but rather as typical of her sex: ‘The girls life had been squandered in the streets and amongst the most noisome of the stews and dens in London, but there was something of the woman’s original nature left in her still’. (p.336) Nancy sacrifices so much for Oliver that it can certainly be argued her affection goes beyond ‘woman’s original nature’. Ayres reinforces this idea by comparing Nancy to the ideological female figure in the novel: ‘It is easy enough for the angel Rose Maylie to provide a nice home for Oliver, but it is costly to Nancy to see that he gets it’.[26] Rose may be able to provide for Oliver materially but Nancy is willing to be beaten by her own ‘family’ in order to protect the boy: ‘She pointed hastily to some vivid bruises on her neck and arms, and continued with great rapidity- ‘Remember this! And don’t let me suffer any more for you just now. If I could help you I would; but I have not the power’’. (p.182). Nancy claims: ‘I have not the power’ as Rose Maylie does, however

[25] Brenda Ayres, ‘The True Heroine of Oliver Twist: Brass can do better than Gold’ in *Dissenting Women In Dickens’ Novels* (London: Greenwood Press, 1998) p120
[26] Brenda Ayres, ‘The True Heroine of Oliver Twist: Brass can do better than Gold’ p121

what little she does have she is willing to give to him, including her life, something far more valuable than mere possession: 'I am about to put my life, and the lives of others in your hands'. (p.368). She is the heroine of the novel, but cares not for glory or prize, asking for 'nothing'. (p.430). Her act is the selfless act typically associated with a mother figure. Nancy's relationship with Bill also proves that she is neither 'vengeful' nor 'unfeeling'. He is cruel but still she faithfully returns to him, an act that eventually costs her life. Historian Michael Slater discusses this: 'For Nancy personal relations take precedence over most other considerations and her horrible death is the direct result of efforts to save a man she loves'.[27] It seems that Nancy craves a 'normal' life away from prostitution, but it is her 'personal relations' that hold her back. Her devotion to Bill is comparable to a wife's love for a husband because she is unwilling to move towards the possibility of a better life without him: '[…] among the men I have told you of there is one: the most desperate among them all: that I can't leave; no, not even to be saved from the life I am leading now'. (p.340) Nancy and her feelings for both Oliver and Bill once again reinforce the idea that the prostitute was not necessarily a cold and unnatural figure.

Undoubtedly Esther and Nancy possess motherly instincts, and it is the little they have to offer but still give which highlights these instincts within the texts. Both women ultimately give their lives for children that are not their own, sacrifices which are not made by any of the ideological female characters in the novels. The portrayal of both Nancy and Esther suggests that a prostitute could wish for marriage and children just like any other woman, but it was her tragic situation that prevented this, not the fact that she was 'unfeeling' or 'vengeful'.

[27] Michael Slater, 'The Women of the Novels' in *Dickens and Women* (London: JM Dent & Sons Ltd, 1983) p221

Reformation of the Prostitute

We have so far established that prostitution was not held with high regard in nineteenth century Britain. It was considered socially and morally corrupt, and needed to be eradicated immediately. Many believed that the way to eradicate the trade was by reforming the women themselves. As a result, rescue homes and 'hospitals' were established throughout the country. The aim of these sanctuaries was to rehabilitate the women and teach them skills: 'the most numerous and important voluntary charities were the female penitentiaries, rescue homes and orphanages that took in destitute and improvident girls and trained them to be domestic servants'.[28] Both Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens were strong supporters of reformation. This chapter will discuss the sanctuaries for 'fallen' women, considering whether Gaskell and Dickens' involvement in the reformation movement effected the portrayals of Nancy and Esther.

There were many rescue houses all over the country, but in 1846 Dickens was approached by the deeply religious million heiress Angela Burdett Coutts who wished to set up her own home for 'fallen' women with his support. Although cynical at first Dickens eventually agreed to the venture, and in 1847 Urania Cottage was established. Set in a small house near Shepherd's Bush, the sanctuary aimed to teach former prostitutes basic domestic skills in preparation for them to migrate and work as servants in expanding British colonies. Dickens and Coutts did not wish to force a strict and punishing regime upon the residents of Urania Cottage as some other homes and hospitals did. Instead Dickens wished to encourage and comfort the women, claiming that he found their stories 'interesting and touching'.[29] Although this may have been the aim of Urania Cottage, there are moments in Dickens'

[28] Judith R Wallowitz, 'Plymouth and Southhampton Under the Contagious Diseases Acts' in in *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women , Class and The State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p157

[29] David Paroissien (ed.), 'Urania Cottage' in *Selected Letters of Charles Dickens* (London: Macmillan Press, 1985) p200

letters to Coutts where the house sounds more like a place of confinement than a sanctuary for unfortunate women. In 1846 he wrote: 'I would divide the interior into two portions; and into the first portion I would put all newcomers without exception, as a place of probation, whence they should pass by their own good conduct and self denial alone into what I may call the society of the house'.[30] Although Dickens most likely suggests this arrangement for practical reasons, the idea of segregation contradicts another of his letters stating that: '[…] the women entering the house should be encouraged rather than constantly reminded of their sin'.[31] Being placed in 'probation' away from the 'society of the house' would certainly remind the women why they were there, and segregation reinforces the idea that prostitutes were considered 'contagious'. Although the first letter could be viewed as judging, Dickens still portrays Nancy as a good character, and writes of her both warmly and sympathetically. Dickens does not seem to judge Nancy, instead he pities her situation. In 1848, a year after the establishment of Urania Cottage, Dickens wrote to Coutts of his encounter with some of the women. At the end of the letter he concluded: '[…]the best man in the world could never make his way to the truth of these people'.[32] Although Dickens may have originally believed that simple routine and seclusion could 'reform' a prostitute he seems to be admitting here that each case is different, and cannot always be easily solved by domestic rules and regulations.

Similarly to Dickens' idea that reforming prostitutes should not be reminded of their past Gaskell believed: 'The purifying purpose did not consist in throwing stones at the woman taken in adultery, but in exposing the hypocrisy of the social system'.[33] Like activist Josephine Butler she was strongly against 'double standards' and attempted to arouse great sympathy through the portrayal of prostitutes in her work. Biographer Winifred Gerin

[30] David Paroissien (ed.), 'Urania Cottage' p193
[31] David Paroissien (ed.), 'Urania Cottage' p196
[32] David Paroissien (ed.), 'Urania Cottage' p203
[33] Winifred Gerin, 'Ruth' in *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) p127

discusses Gaskell's writing: 'To have written with such sympathy of a 'fallen woman' was in her day and age an act of courage that even Dickens, with his shadowy flitting figures of prostitutes was reluctant to emulate'.[34] Certainly in *Mary Barton* Gaskell does not conceal Esther's situation, and openly uses the terms 'prostitute' and 'streetwalker'. Reference to the trade is made even before Esther's fall: '[…] when honest women are in their beds, you'll be a streetwalker, Esther, and then, don't you go to think I'll have you darken my door'. (p.9). Perhaps Esther's tragic ending was also a deliberate strategy to evoke sympathy in her readers. Mary claims: 'We'll make her good […] we'll help her get rid of her sins', (p.363). but she is too late. The streets have made Esther ill, and although she finds her way home in the end she is too far gone: '[…] fallen in to what appeared to be simply a heap of white or light coloured clothes, fainting or dead, lay the poor crushed butterfly'. (p.365). Similarly to Esther, Nancy also meets with a gruesome and unfortunate ending: 'Of all the bad deeds that, under cover of darkness, had been committed with London's bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst'. (p441). Nancy's bloody death attempts to evoke not only sympathy from the reader but anger. Both Esther and Nancy refuse help, and as a result they meet with abrupt and tragic endings. This perhaps suggests that Gaskell and Dickens saw reformation as the only way forward and for those who remained connected to the trade, the ending was dire. Brenda Ayres' seems to agree with this suggestion: 'The text suggests that if Nancy had gone to America she would have enjoyed a life comparable to Rose's, but in the New World. It appears that women are to be considered victims of their environment, and that if given a chance to reform, they should, and society would stand to benefit from their reformation'.[35] Nancy could have easily accepted protection and the promise of a new life, however she chooses not to, and it is ultimately this decision which causes her death.

[34] Winifred Gerin, 'Ruth' p141

[35] Brenda Ayres, 'The True Heroine of Oliver Twist: Brass can do better than Gold'p124

Although Dickens may have been passionately involved in the idea of reformation, some of his letters reveal a realisation that some women simply could not or did not want to reform. In 1848 he wrote of the antics of one of the residents of Urania Cottage: 'Jemima Hiscock forced open the door of the little beer cellar with knives and got dead drunk […] Jemima used the most horrible language and it was thought the beer must have been laced with spirits from over the wall'.[36] Many women knew no other trade than prostitution, so the lifestyle and socially 'unacceptable' behaviour was natural to them. Besides reformation other common endings for prostitutes included murder, death by illness or suicide as is referenced by Nancy in *Oliver Twist*: 'I look at that dark water. How many times do you read of such as I who spring into the tide […] I shall come to that at last'. (p.432). It seems that if a woman remained in prostitution the chances of a natural death was unlikely. However in 1870 Daniel Cooper, the secretary of the rescue society of London recognized that: 'Not all women who have thus been led astray give themselves up subsequently to an abandoned life'.[37] Indeed for many women prostitution really was just a temporary solution to end poverty, which Wallowitz reinforces: 'For many working class women prostitution was a transitional occupation, not a lifetime identity'.[38] Wallowitz argues that for some women prostitution was merely a practical but temporary opportunity to make money, not an experience which would lead to an 'abandoned life'.

The reformation movement shows an improvement in society's views of prostitution. Whereas previously prostitutes were considered 'social evil' and damned for all eternity, organisations now wanted to help and provide sanctuary for these women rather than condemning them. For many women however, prostitution was simply a way of life and the

[36] David Paroissien (ed.), 'Urania Cottage' p200
[37] Daniel Cooper, *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Rescue Society, London 1870* in Judith R Wallowitz, 'Prostitution, Social Science and Venereal Disease' in *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women , Class and The State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p48
[38] Judith R Wallowitz, 'Prostitution, Social Science and Venereal Disease' in *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women , Class and The State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p46

chance to reform was rejected because it had become a habit and an ‘easy’ way of making money. Ultimately prostitution could affect different women in different ways, it depended on their situation. Important factors included how long a woman had been in the trade, how she had been treated, and why she had turned to prostitution in the first place. It was most likely these things that effected how the woman chose to end or spend the rest of her life.

Chapter Two

Other Readings of Prostitution in *The Crimson Petal and the White*

The Prostitute as a Maternal Figure

The dissertation has so far considered the prostitute as a maternal figure in *Oliver Twist* and *Mary Barton.* It will now continue this discussion using *The Crimson Petal and the White* as a reference. Nineteenth century historian Mary Poovey claims that: 'The fallen woman was the middle-class mothers opposite'.[39] Inspired by Queen Victoria, the ideological nineteenth century middle-class mother was portrayed as a domestic angel, who guided and protected her children, forming a physical and emotional relationship with them. By analysing the characters of Sugar, Mrs Castaway and Amy this chapter aims to ultimately discover whether the prostitute was a maternal figure or if she was in fact the 'opposite' of the ideological middle-class mother.

Frances Finnegan writes that: 'Comparatively few prostitutes had children because first they were so subject to abortion that they rarely reached the full term of their pregnancy, and secondly a high portion of their infants died within a few weeks of birth as the result of a syphilitic infection […] infanticide was held to be common amongst prostitutes'.[40] This suggests that the prostitute was not typically considered a maternal figure, and certainly Amy and Mrs Castaway who have children of their own show no affection towards their offspring. Christopher calls his mother by her first name and she refrains from calling him anything but 'boy' denying any sort of connection or relation to each other. He appears almost none existent to her as can be seen by her casual ignorance of him when she leaves Sugar's

[39] Mary Poovey, 'The Anathematized Race: The Governess and Jane Eyre' in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid Victorian England* (London: Virago Press, 1989) p145
[40] Frances Finnegan, 'The Prostitutes and Brother Keepers' p85

bedroom: 'And she slouches out, knocking Christopher off balance like a skittle'.[41] Sugar describes Christopher as 'the unwanted product of her womb', (p.280). and considering Amy's feelings towards the child, it perhaps seems unusual that she did not have an abortion or commit infanticide as suggested by Finnegan. Arguably Amy only keeps Christopher because he is of some use to her and can earn a living. He is porter and general servant in the brothel, tasks that would otherwise have to be performed by the women. When Amy takes on these tasks for a short while she quickly becomes agitated: 'Amy Howlett groans […] where *is* that boy?'(p.164). This reinforces her practical use of Christopher. Mrs Castaway has a similar relationship with Sugar, a daughter who she evidently has no maternal affection for. Although Sugar is Mrs Castaway's daughter she treats her no differently, seeing her only as another business interest: 'You understand […] that if we are to have a happy and harmonious house, I can't treat you any differently from any of my other girls'.(p.285). It almost seems that Mrs Castaway gave birth with the intention of selling Sugar, as she forces her into prostitution as soon as she hits adolescence: 'Six years have passed since the howling night when Mrs Castaway tiptoed to Sugar's bed and told her she needn't shiver anymore, a kind gentleman had come to keep her warm […] Sugar strains to recall a Mrs Castaway further removed in time, a mother less vinegary and more nourishing'. (p.283). Sugar 'strains to recall' a time when Mrs Castaway acted affectionately or maternally towards her, suggesting that they have never had a relationship beyond the trade. Mrs Castaway and Amy may have produced children that are biologically their own, however the attitude and treatment towards these children reinforces the idea that 'fallen' women were the 'opposite' of the stereotypical mother figure.

Unlike Mrs Castaway and Amy Sugar may not have any children of her own, but her maternal instincts develop throughout the text. At the beginning of the novel it is evident that

[41] Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal in the White* (London: Canongate, 2011) p281 For all further references see the body of the text

she has feelings of affection for Christopher, however she is unable to physically act upon these feelings: '[…] stepping back, sick with the inability to touch him, to kiss him, to ruffle his hair or stroke his cheek; sick with shame […]' (p.281). It could be argued that Sugar does not understand maternal affection as her own life has been void of it, but the fact that she is 'sick with shame' at her inability to touch the boy suggests that she does have a maternal instinct, but does not know how to show it. Sugar's first encounter with a child is when she walks past an abandoned infant lying on the streets of the city: 'A small child of uncertain sex lies huddled in a pale yellow blanket that twinkles with melted frost. In the pale sunlight, the drizzle of snot on the child's lips and mouth shines like raw egg yolk; and Sugar, disgusted, looks away. Alive or dead, this child is doomed: it is not possible to save anyone in this world; except oneself '. (p.41). The word 'disgusted' presents Sugar as pitiless and unfeeling, however the fact that she 'looks away' could suggest that she is not disgusted by the child, but by the concept that she cannot save it, and therefore looking will only distress her. This is reinforced by the disgust she feels at herself for leaving Christopher behind: 'You should have taken Christopher with you, a reproachful voice hisses in her sluggish brain. Mrs Castaway's is no place for a child […]'(p.583). Now that Sugar has moved away from the brothel and has her own private rooms, she believes she could have saved Christopher, highlighting that she no longer considers every child to be 'doomed' as she did when she saw the child on the street. Indeed it is only when Sugar moves away from Mrs Castaway's and becomes a mistress rather than a prostitute that her maternal instinct is truly revealed, proposing that whilst in the trade of prostitution, saving or committing to a child was not possible.

When Sugar meets Sophie Rackham her maternal instincts grow even stronger. At first sight the two connect: 'For a fraction of a second the little girl's eyes and Sugar's eyes meet, and something is communicated'. (p.425) Sugar is Sophie's governess, and Mary

Poovey states that: 'the role of the governess was to reproduce the domestic ideal'.[42] Sugar's feelings for Sophie seem to surpass beyond a mere 'role' however, and her relationship with the child becomes stronger than any of the relationships Sophie has with her blood relatives. Sophie has been rejected by her mother as Sugar was rejected by hers, but rather than allowing the influence of Mrs Castaway to affect her, Sugar makes a promise that Sophie will never have to suffer as she did: 'When it's over I'll make sure you have a bed. The warmest, cleanest, softest, driest, nicest bed in the whole world'. (p.813). The fact that Sugar has never truly had a mother herself yet is filled with love for Sophie reinforces that maternity was not necessarily an environmental factor affected by class and up-bringing, but a feeling that came naturally. Jeannette King, a revisionist literature critic claims that: 'There were many women, including feminists who argued that women's highest fulfilment came from motherhood'.[43] Certainly Sugar seems to achieve 'fulfilment' through helping and teaching Sophie, as can be seen by the evident pride she feels when helping the child to overcome her bed wetting habit: 'Sugar is proud of her success, prouder than she's been of anything she can remember'. (p.555) Such is Sugar's fulfilment in acting as the mother to Sophie that she is unwilling to give it up. It is her feelings for Sophie that ultimately lead Sugar to break the patriarchal chains that have held her for so long, emphasising the power of maternal love.

King discusses maternal love: 'Maternal love, instinctive according to Victorian ideology, is in reality the privilege of the free and prosperous'.[44] Although Sugar may take Sophie from William at the end of the novel, she still has to sacrifice her own child in an attempt to maintain her position as governess, reinforcing King's point that maternal love could only be truly exercised by the privileged. Sugar evidently feels something for her

[42] Mary Poovey, 'The Anathematized Race: The Governess and Jane Eyre' p145
[43] Jeanette King, 'Introduction' in *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Fiction,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p9
[44] Jeanette King, 'Evolutionary thought: Gender and Race' in *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Fiction,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p165

unborn child: ‘She steps forward, then notices she’s cradling her belly again […]’ (p.748). The action of ‘cradling the belly’ is typically associated with pregnant women and is a movement symbolising protection. Sugar is unaware that she is cradling her belly which demonstrates a natural instinct to protect her own child and suggests that she does not want to miscarry but has no other choice. Similarly Caroline is a woman who clearly possesses maternal instincts but is unable to act on these instincts because of her position in society. Caroline was a mother and to save her dying child turned to the trade of prostitution. It is because of this unfortunate position and the disease it has brought her that Caroline is unable to have another child: ‘[…] maybe her blighted insides couldn’t even sprout another baby […]’ (p.12). It is evident that Caroline would like another child, as when she sees other women with offspring she feels envious: ‘Caroline envies these women […] both Nellie and Mrs Mulvaney have children, and Caroline had a child once upon a time, and lost it, and now she’ll never have another’. (p.12). This supports King’s theory that only women who were ‘free’ and ‘prosperous’ could afford to look after children, and implies that a prostitute did not necessarily lack maternal instinct, she was just not in a situation to give it.

Poovey argues that a ‘fallen’ woman was the opposite of a middle class maternal figure but in *The Crimson Petal in The White* this is not the case. Agnes is a middle class mother yet her blatant rejection of her biological child is similar to that of Mrs Castaway and Amy, evidently showing that they are not ‘opposite’ but the same. Mrs Castaway and Amy are indifferent to their biological children and see them as objects of use rather than love. It could be argued however, that if the circumstances were different and they had the money and freedom to take care of a child a maternal instinct might be revealed. Sugar is unable to act on her maternal feelings until she has turned from prostitution and the streets, suggesting that it was this that held her back. Sugar is a ‘fallen’ woman, but the thought she has for Sophie’s well-being, appearance and education demonstrate characteristics of the ideological middle

class mother, proving that the 'fallen' woman was not necessarily 'the opposite of the middle-class mother'. Overall the novel seems to infer that prostitution was a trade that perhaps limited maternal love because of the circumstances, but ultimately maternal instinct depends on an individual and is a natural feeling that is not always dictated by lifestyle, up-bringing or class.

Prostitution and Female Comradery

Literary critic Tess Cosslett asserts that: 'In Victorian novels, women's friendships are present only in momentary 'islands''.[45] Contemporary to the nineteenth century writer Virginia Woolf agrees that the representation of female friendship in nineteenth century literature was rare, claiming that women were not portrayed as friends but as rivals: 'Women were often more presented as rivals because they were seen solely in their relationship to men'.[46] As a Neo-Victorian text *The Crimson Petal and the White* looks beyond the stereotype of women as rivals, and explores a range of friendships between women of different positions in society. This chapter will mainly concentrate on the friendship between Sugar and her fellow prostitutes, and Sugar's relationship with Agnes, discussing whether the different positions of the women affect their companionship.

Wallowitz discusses the comradery between prostitutes: 'While in the 'life' prostitutes seem to have been most tied to each other […] prostitutes viewed female companionship as a positive feature of their situation'.[47] Before Sugar meets William and becomes his mistress,

[45] Tess Cosslett, 'Introduction' in *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988) p11
[46] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own, London 1977* in Tess Cosslett 'Madonna's and Magdalene's' in *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988) p297

[47] Judith R Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p27

she certainly appears to value her female comrades, claiming that she is writing her novel not only for herself but for all other prostitutes as well: 'All the fallen women of the world are relying on her to tell the truth. This story, she used to say to those of her friends who could read, isn't about me, it's about all of us.' (p.334). Sugar believes her fellow prostitutes are 'relying' on her and strives to help them by using her education and experience of being in the same situation. The women gather and Sugar entertains them with impersonations and mockery of men: 'Her parlour piece- a great favourite with all of the whores […] Sugar pretending to be an invisible man, almost hysterical with lust. Oh you must let me stroke your balls. They are so beautiful-like…like a dog turd'! (p.28). The fact that these women gather to impersonate and laugh about the men who take advantage of their services suggests that they are not in competition with each other but instead can recognise, bond and make light of the unfortunate situation that they are in. Sugar recognises fellow prostitute and companion Caroline at the beginning of the novel, and it is made evident by her 'glow' that she is genuinely glad to see her friend: 'The younger woman's expression in recognising her friend glows […]' (p.27). The women seem to have an affectionate relationship: 'In the darkening room, as the warmth from the fire begins to spread, the two of them keep hold of one another'. (p.485) This action seems almost sisterly and suggests protection and comfort, portraying love and friendship not rivalry.

Caroline and Sugar are clearly close companions, but as Sugar moves away from prostitution and becomes William's mistress, a distance between the two women develops. Although Sugar does not view Caroline as 'below' her she begins to notice the difference between her new way of life and Caroline's: 'How long have Caroline's window-panes been so appallingly begrimed by soot? Surely they weren't so dirty last time? Did the room always smell this way'? (p.408). Historian Cecil Bishop wrote that: 'Prostitutes were known to aid each other in times of distress or 'club together' to pay for a proper funeral or to raise money

for bail or for doctor's fees'.[48] Sugar has money that she can give to Caroline now that she is a kept woman, but refrains from doing so: 'Do you want some money? Five simple words. Stashed in your purse you have far more that Caddy will earn in a month. So say it, you coward…you louse…you whore'! (p.410). Bishop claims that 'prostitutes were known to aid each other' however Sugar is no longer a prostitute, which is perhaps why she does not give Caroline the money. It would not be an act of comradery, but of charity. At the very beginning of the novel we witness Sugar offering to help and give money to the dying Elizabeth: 'They won't toss you in the river. I won't let them […] If you want a burial, I'll arrange it'. (p.334) Arguably Sugar offers aid to Elizabeth because at this point she is still a prostitute and feels a sense of comradery, but as a distinguished mistress believes she no longer has any right to help Caroline. This idea is reinforced by Sugar's novel. As a prostitute Sugar is dedicated to her work and the exposure of the truth, however once she becomes William's mistress the novel is neglected: 'Two hours later, having stored her novel away in its drawer and read the latest Illustrated London News instead, Sugar is in the bath'. (p.336). Sugar is void of all inspiration and anger to write for her fellow prostitutes, highlighting the suggestion that an absence from prostitution has made Sugar lose her sense of female comradery.

Indeed Mary Higgs, a Victorian analyst of the 'social abyss' believed that comradery between prostitutes only existed because no other group in society would accept them: 'On her soul lay the knowledge of the horror of respectable society towards what she had become and the attraction of the fellowship of those who would receive her freely'.[49] Once offered the opportunity for a better life Sugar does neglect her friends in order to concentrate on pleasing William: 'Would she sit with Caroline all night if Caroline was dying, and there was a chance

[48] Cecil Bishop, *Women and Crime 1931* in Judith R Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p27
[49] Mary Higgs, *Glimpse into the Abyss 1906* in Tess Cosslett 'Madonna's and Magdalene's' p214

to lie with William instead? Probably not'. (p.480). Sugar seems determined to be accepted into 'respectable society', and when she becomes a governess, the idea of companionship with the other servants becomes thrilling to her: 'All this talk of we is delicious; she could kiss Rose for starting it'. (p.611). Sugar may be absorbed in her new life with William, however she does not entirely abandon her past and still visits Caroline. When she realises how distant the two of them have become she is ashamed and upset: 'I'm no longer your friend! Sobs Sugar, the words muffled inside her palms. I've become a stranger to you'. (p.484) In changing her status Sugar has lost the sense of female comradery she once shared with her fellow prostitutes, but her reaction suggests that this is not without regret, and emphasises Wallowitz's earlier point that female companionship was considered a positive aspect of the life.

Although Sugar has grown apart from her old companions, there is still a sense of female compassion between herself and Agnes whilst they are kept by William. Agnes is unaware of Sugar's position in society, but still views her as a saviour and someone to take comfort in. Sugar feels responsible for Agnes and arguably connects with her because they are both trapped in a patriarchal society, and are at the mercy of the same man. Like her relationship with the prostitutes, Sugar is in a similar situation to Agnes and can relate to her which is what brings them together. Historian Martha Vicinus discusses the idea of the pure woman and the 'fallen': '[…] the picture of the highly controlled and pure woman caring for prostitutes had a peculiar appeal and reassurance'.[50] In *The Crimson Petal and the White* there is a role reversal however, and it is Agnes who begs Sugar to save her. Sugar promises to protect Agnes: 'Soon I'll help you get away from here, soon I promise'. (p.643). She jeopardises her own position in order to help Agnes escape from confinement in an

[50] Martha Vicinus, 'Settlement Houses: A Community Ideal for the Poor' *Independent Women: Work and Community for the Single Woman 1850-1890* (London: Virago, 1985) p214

institution, suggesting that although Sugar has moved away from her background of prostitution, a sense of female comradery still remains within her.

Woolf claims that nineteenth century writers only portrayed women as 'rivals', but perhaps this is because writers did not focus on prostitutes or working class women, concentrating instead on the idealised middle/upper class female figure. Certainly the middle and upper class women in *The Crimson Petal and the White* are represented as rivals. The 'season' consists of several events in which the higher classes compete over who wears the latest fashion and who possesses the most money, for instance Agnes is triumphant that her carriage is worth more than Lady Bridgelow's: 'It's grander than Lady Bridgelow's, and hers cost £180'. (p.389). Rather than expressing concern when Agnes becomes unwell whilst at the theatre, the women she is with see it as an excuse to pick fault with her appearance: 'Goodness yes, you do look peakish! […] are you getting enough to eat my dear'? (p.392). Whereas the companionship between the prostitutes brings them a sense of comfort and protection, the relationship between the upper/middle class women in the novel is based very much on a competition of material possession. These women have husbands, households and money and therefore have no urgent need for female companionship. They are rivals, not friends.

Overall it seems that female comradery in *The Crimson Petal and the White* stems from the women's suffering. Sugar and her fellow prostitutes bond over their solidarity against men, and can find comfort in each other because each knows what the other has suffered. Once Sugar's position in society changes she does not feel a sense of female comradery with the other prostitutes because she no longer suffers as they do. Her female compassion instead moves to Agnes. They are both women dependent on William and Sugar can empathise with Agnes and her desperate need to free herself of his hold. The middle and upper class females in the novel are rivals, void of any sense of female comradery. It could be argued however

that this is because they do not suffer and so have nothing to bond or connect over. In conclusion position in society and situations experienced certainly effected female friendship by either bringing women together or creating a distance between them.

Mary Magdalene, the Virgin Mary and their Relation to the Prostitute

Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary are religious figures that were symbolic of the two types of women in Victorian society. Whilst Mary Magdalene was a woman associated with female downfall and sin, the Virgin Mary presented a contrasting image of goodness, purity and obedience. Both nineteenth century literature and society portrayed the prostitute as an 'aggressive, carnal Magdalene',[51] and the idealised domestic woman typically possessed the angelic attributes of the Virgin Mary. However in *The Crimson Petal and the White* the division between Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary seems to erode and qualities of both the 'sinner' and the 'saint' can be found in Agnes and Sugar. This chapter will explore the image and characteristics of these two women, and contrast them to nineteenth century portraits of the religious figures, aiming to prove that women could not easily be split into the simple categories of 'Magdalene' and 'Madonna'.

Paintings of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene can be found in the appendices. Appendix three, 'The Girlhood of Mary Virgin' created by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1848 depicts the young Virgin Mary. She sits in bright daylight, surrounded by flowers, a golden halo symbolising her purity, and the biblical texts highlight her dedication to Christianity. Certainly this image of the Virgin Mary is physically comparable to Agnes Rackham, and Faber comments on Agnes' likeness to the painting: 'Look into her heart and you will see a

[51] Mary Poovey, 'Introduction' in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid Victorian England* (London: Virago Press, 1989) p11

pretty picture, like a prayer card depicting the girlhood of the virgin'. (p.159) Mary is petite and delicate, her hands small and childlike, her lips a fresh rose bud pink. The white gown which symbolises her purity is long and flowing, concealing her naked flesh from lustful, sinful eyes. Agnes is described by Faber in a similar way: '[…] that gown, so ample in comparison to her dainty body […] five foot two with eyes of blue […] her mouth like a tiny pink vulva, pristine'. (p.130). Tess Cosslett asserts that: 'A woman's hair is often used to signify her sexuality in Victorian literature'.[52] Mary's hair is painted a dazzling golden colour in the portrait, similarly to Agnes' fine blonde tresses: '[…] her blonde hair was smooth and fine'. (p.130). In the painting Mary is occupied by needle work, similarly Agnes spends a lot of her time creating dresses and using such skills: 'With each seam and tuck they complete, the two women interrupt their labours, remove the dress from the machine, replace it on the dummy'. (p158). Although Agnes uses a machine and Mary uses her own hands, both of these pastimes are typically associated with domesticity which was an idealised quality for a woman in the nineteenth century.

Whilst Agnes appears to be domestic and angelic like the Virgin Mary, the image of Sugar is contrasting. She is tall and thin: '[…] what appears to be a tall, gaunt boy wreathed from neck to ankle in women's clothing' (p.25). and her lips are 'pale, dry and flaking'. (p.26). Whereas Agnes' hair is perfect and blonde like the Madonna's, Sugar's hair is 'flame-red', (p.99). a colour often linked to the fires of hell, suggesting sin and wickedness. Although we cannot see the colour of Mary Magdalene's hair in 'The First Meeting of Christ and Mary Magdalene' there are other associations that can be made to the stereotypical prostitute. Henryk Siemiradzki's painting which was created in 1873 portrays the apparent prostitute Mary Magdalene and the holy figure of Christ. Whilst Christ stands dressed in a pure white tunic, Mary is dressed in bright, elaborate clothing, typically associated with the prostitute.

[52] Tess Cosslett, 'Magdalene's and Madonna's' p61

When William first meets Sugar he describes her clothing: 'The woman is all in black- no dark green'. (p.99). The fact that Sugar is dressed in such a dark colour emphasises how unlike the figure of the Virgin Mary she is, she could not have chosen a colour more contrasting. In the painting of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, Christ stands bathed in light whilst Mary cowers in the shade. Mary Magdalene is often depicted in shade or in darkness, as can be seen in earlier seventeenth century paintings by Georges de la Tour and Domenico Tintoretto which are both in the appendices. The darkness is relatable to the stereotypical prostitute or as they were later termed 'ladies of the night'. The prostitute was associated with darkness because generally this was when her work would take place. The fact that they walked the streets alone after dark was also a feature which differentiated the prostitute from the average woman. Although it is not a nineteenth century piece, it must be noted that the Magdalene portrayed in Tintoretto's painting has red hair, a feature that is comparable to Sugar. Similarly the prostitute in 'Aurelia' has red hair reinforcing Cosslett's earlier point that a woman's hair colour was linked to her sexuality. Whilst golden hair was symbolic of purity, red hair was perhaps another stereotype of the 'fallen' woman.

Whilst the appearances of Agnes and Sugar may be similar to their biblical stereotypes, there are certain qualities which Sugar possesses that are comparable to the Virgin Mary. Jeanette King writes that: 'The mother of Christ, Mary provides maternal devotion and silent submissiveness'.[53] According to the bible Jesus was not conceived by the Virgin Mary, yet she still cherishes, protects and cares for the child. As discussed in a previous section, Sugar proves to be a loving mother figure to Sophie, a child which is not biologically her own, which links her to the Madonna. King discusses the Virgin Mary's obedient quality of 'silent submissiveness', and certainly Sugar is obedient and submissive to William whilst kept by him: 'I'll do anything you ask of me'. (p.100). Indeed, when William

[53] Jeanette King, 'Religious Prescriptions and Cultural Reflections' in *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p10

first meets Sugar he can see her angelic qualities, and even notes: 'a faint halo of vapour rising from her bonnet', (p.100). almost like the one surrounding the Virgin Mary in Rossetti's painting. Agnes on the other hand possesses neither 'maternal devotion' nor 'silent submissiveness'. She rejects her baby, refusing to believe in her existence: 'In this house, Agnes is childless' (p.546), and she constantly subverts from her role as the obedient wife. She refuses to give William a son, embarrasses him at social events and makes her hatred of him quite clear: 'They are almost shoulder to shoulder, nose to nose. Panting and red faced with spittle on her chin, she fixes him with a stare of righteous disgust'. (p594). The wicked and sinful 'fallen' woman seems to represent more characteristics of the Virgin Mary than the idealised Agnes, reinforcing the point that women could not simply be categorized as 'Magdalene' or 'Madonna'.

Historian Martha Vicinus discusses the idea of 'fallen' women as victims: '[…] victims in need of help, not a sinner in need of reform […] A victim of male sexuality and female betrayal'.[54] Sugar reinforces this claim: 'I am what you would call a fallen woman but I can assure you I did not fall- I was pushed'. (p.336). Sugar did not choose a life of 'sin' she was forced into it by her mother, and has since been held down by patriarchal society. The fact that she is a victim makes her seem slightly vulnerable, a feature that could certainly be associated with the fragile and innocent figure of the Virgin Mary. Arguably it is because Sugar was 'pushed' into prostitution and did not choose the life that she is able to possess attributes of the Madonna. Like Jesus Christ, Sugar was innocent and was sacrificed for the sins of others, a fact which surely places her in the category of 'saint'.

In conclusion, it is evident that women could not simply be placed into categories. Both Sugar and Agnes have combined qualities of the religious figures, and whilst Agnes may

[54] Martha Vicinus, 'Church Communities: Sisterhoods and Deaconess' Houses' *Independent Women: Work and Community for the Single Woman 1850-1890* (London: Virago, 1985) p52

look like the Virgin Mary and share her religious devotion, Sugar is a caring and maternal woman, silently submissive to her lover. When Agnes first sees Sugar she is described as 'the lady in white' (p.289) and Agnes believes her to be a 'divine spirit'. (p.289). The fact that Agnes believes Sugar to be the opposite of her biblical stereotype once again reinforces the fragility of the boundary between 'Magdalene' and 'Madonna', and proves that no woman could or should be so easily categorized.

Chapter Three

The Prostitute: Powerful or Powerless?

The Prostitute as a Powerful Figure

So far it appears that Victorian society only viewed the prostitute in a negative light. She was considered either a sinful temptress or a helpless victim, and aroused feelings of pity, hatred and fear. Nineteenth century writer Charles Baudelaire described the prostitute as: 'A woman in revolt against society',[55] and indeed she did 'revolt' by choosing not to live within the strict confines of what was deemed 'respectable'. This suggests that the prostitute was fearless of judgement. As well as fearless, the prostitute was financially independent, and often possessed physical strength that most other women in the nineteenth century did not. Arguably these qualities make the prostitute appear powerful and in control, rather than the dirty and pitiful women typically represented in nineteenth century literature. This final chapter will explore the prostitute as both a powerful and a powerless figure. It will look at all three of the texts previously used in this dissertation and their different interpretations of the prostitute. It will also introduce *Mrs Warren's Profession,* a play written by George Bernard Shaw in 1893, and focus on the character of Kitty Warren. This first section of the chapter will concentrate on the powerful elements of the prostitute.

In order to live and succeed in such a harsh trade the prostitute had to be strong willed and ready to fight for survival. As a result the prostitute is often represented as a fiery and determined character. Literary critic Tom Winnifrith discusses his opinion of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*: 'Nancy is the principal female character easily outshining the colourless and

[55] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1995) p38

conventional heroine Rose Maylie'.[56] Whereas Rose Maylie is presented as calm and angelic, Nancy is a feisty woman ready to fight for what she believes in, as can be seen when she physically attacks Fagin: 'The girl said nothing more, but tearing at her hair and dress in a transport of frenzy, made such a rush at the Jew as would probably have left signal marks of her revenge upon him, had not her hands been seized by Sikes at the right moment'. (p.144). Although it would not be considered 'respectable' for a woman to act in this way, Nancy demonstrates a violent temper that can do damage and 'leave marks', a fact that the men certainly seem to be aware of: 'There is something about a roused woman, especially if she adds to all her other strong passions the fierce impulses of recklessness and despair, which few men like to provoke'. (p142). That the men dare not provoke her further implies that they are afraid which gives Nancy a sense of power. The fact that she is so passionate and stands up for her rights suggests that she is not the pitiful and weak figure so often stereotyped.

Similarly Kitty Warren in *Mrs Warren's Profession* has a fierce temper that her male companions seem to fear, as can be seen when Mr Praed warns Vivie: 'Your mother is not to be trifled with when she is angry'.[57] Kitty is a passionate character who firmly believes in what she does, and when daughter Vivie does attempt to 'trifle with her' she takes control of the argument with ease, leaving her stubborn and highly educated daughter lost for words: 'Her replies which have sounded sensible and strong to her so far, now begin to ring rather woodenly and even priggishly against the new tone of her mother'. (p.52). Her argument is strong because she firmly believes that her involvement in prostitution was the right thing to do. She is assertive, which Wallowitz claims was a common quality amongst prostitutes: 'Seasoned prostitutes were capable of independent and assertive behaviour rarely found

[56] Tom Winnifrith, 'Dickens' in *The Fallen Women in the Nineteenth Century* (London: St Martin's Press, 1994) p101
[57] George Bernard Shaw, *Mrs Warren's Profession* (Stillwell: Digireads, 2007) p31 For all further references see the body of the text

among women of their own class'.[58] Kitty believes that prostitution was the only way to secure a better life for herself and her daughter, and has independently worked her way up from poverty. She discusses her decision to enter the trade: 'Do you think we are such fools as to let other people trade in our good looks by employing us as shop girls, or barmaids or waitresses, when we could trade them in ourselves and get all of the profits instead of starvation wages'? (p.54). She uses her looks to her advantage, and is able to tempt men with her sexuality which gives her a sense of control over them. Kitty considers prostitution a business venture. She 'respects'(p.56). and 'controls'(p.56). herself and as a result has achieved a life of wealth and luxury. Kitty Warren is certainly not a weak figure but is a determined and independent business woman who has made the best of a bad situation.

Historian Kathryn Gleadle believes that many women saw prostitution as a financial opportunity: 'Feminists frequently conveyed prostitutes as victims, seeing them as the epitome of society's patriarchal sexual hierarchy […] Prostitutes could be more pragmatic about their situation however, presenting the sex trade as a rational decision they had made in their economic options'.[59] Like Kitty Warren, Caroline in *The Crimson Petal and the White* sees prostitution as an easy way to make money, and rather than envying the 'respectable' women about her, she pities them: 'Poor ugly biddies: they spend their daylight hours drudging in the scalding heat for next to nothing then come home to drunken husbands who knock them from one wall to the other.' (p.12). These 'respectable' women are beaten and controlled by their husbands, a mistreatment that Wallowitz argues prostitutes would not tolerate: 'They negotiated their own prices and they were as likely to exploit their clients as to suffer humiliation at male hands'.[60] A prostitute was able to control and negotiate her relations with her customers. She could choose who she had relations with and was able to

[58] Judith R Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p20
[59] Kathryn Gleadle, 'Working Class Women: 1860-1900' in *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Palgrave, 2001) p99
[60] Judith R Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p31

‘exploit’ the lust of men to make money. Other Victorian women however were often trapped by marriage and helpless to leave. The fact that the prostitute was free from commitment and the control of a husband reinforces her independence and the power she had over her own life in comparison to other women in the nineteenth century.

Sugar ‘exploits’ William in *The Crimson Petal and the White.* Sugar is intelligent and strong willed. She has patiently worked her way up the ‘social ladder,’ and is able to manipulate William Rackham by the clever lies she tells and the cunning insinuations that she makes. Sugar helps to decide her own fate when she moves out of the city into her own rooms: ‘My God. You’ll keep me better than you do now, my dear Willy’. (p.239). Her false praises and adoration leave the naïve and oblivious Rackham completely under her spell, and it seems that it is she who is in control of him. Sugar manages to work her way from brothel ‘whore’ to mistress because William is terrified by the concept of losing her: ‘He must have Sugar entirely to himself’. (p.127). He admires her not only sexually, but intellectually, considering her to be better educated than most women of his own class: ‘Yet she’s well versed in many of the authors he holds in high esteem- and she adores Swift! Swift! Swift, his favourite! To most women- Agnes among them unfortunately- Swift is the name of a cough lozenge, or a bird to be worn stuffed on their bonnets. But Sugar…’ (p.102). Due to her intelligence, Sugar surpasses her role as William’s ‘whore’ and becomes his business confidant as well. He trusts and relies on her meaning that she cannot easily be replaced, a fact which gives her a sense of control and power over William.

As well as being mentally determined and strong willed, prostitutes generally possessed a physical strength that was not typical of women in the Victorian period. William Acton describes the typical physical condition of prostitutes: ‘[…] when actively engaged in the activity, being endowed with ‘iron bodies’, they were freer than all other classes of

female'.[61] In *Mary Barton* Esther is able to survive for years in a brutal environment: 'No; if you want me come at night and look at the corners of the streets about here. The colder, the bleaker, the more stormy the night, the more certain you will be to find me […] it is so cold sleeping in entries and on door steps'. (p.154). Esther is homeless, yet she manages to survive the weather and the disease from the streets. Many of her family and friends such as Mr Wilson and Mrs Barton have both food and shelter yet die before her, suggesting that her trials on the street have made her physically strong and more immune to disease. Similarly Nancy in *Oliver Twist* avoids catching any sort of disease despite her environment. On the other hand Rose Maylie is brought up in luxury and still manages to contract a life threatening virus: '[…] the hue of her countenance had turned to a marble whiteness […] there was an anxious haggard look about the gentle face'. (p.293). Nancy does not have warm shelter, good food and money to pay for a doctor as Rose does, but she is described as 'stout and hearty' (p.77). reinforcing Acton's idea that prostitutes did indeed have 'iron bodies'.

As well as having 'iron bodies', prostitutes needed to have a good knowledge of their surroundings in order to survive. In *The Crimson Petal and the White* Sugar leads William through the slums of London in complete darkness. He is drunk and unsure as to where he is, and his only guide is Sugar: 'Watch your step […] its Sugar who utters them; she's taken hold of her companions hand, and for a moment, steers him closer to her, away from a puddle of creamy vomit quivering on the cobbles'. (p.107). The streets are a dangerous place, and William is entirely at the mercy of Sugar's guidance, he is in her power. Later William puts himself at the mercy of Caroline. When he falls through the stairs of the brothel in which Caroline works, he is dependent on her to help him to safety. When Caroline sees how vulnerable and naïve William is she offers to accompany him through the streets of London: 'I'll stay with you Sir […] else you'll get yourself killed'. (p.831). William has literally put

[61] William Acton, 'Causes of Prostitution' p31

his life in the hands of Caroline, and his reliance on her puts him entirely in her control. The fact that prostitutes were aware of their surroundings seemingly not only helped with their own survival, but also gave them an advantage over naïve middle class customers. As long as the customer was in an environment unknown to him he was dependant on the prostitute to lead him to his destination, therefore putting the prostitute in a position of power.

The prostitute could certainly be considered a powerful figure. She was financially independent, street-wise and often possessed a physical stamina that was unheard of amongst 'respectable' groups of Victorian women. Vivie Warren remarks that her mother is: 'stronger than all of England' (p.56). and indeed the prostitute needed to be strong in order to overcome society's opinions of her and survive what were often brutal conditions. Once a woman turned to prostitution she crossed beyond the boundaries of what was acceptable in society, so no longer had to follow society's ideals. She was free from convention, which can be argued gave her a sense of power and independence in comparison to the dutiful and virtuous wives tied down by their husbands and domestic duties.

The Prostitute as a Powerless Figure

So far the Victorian prostitute has been considered as an independent woman in control of her life; however there are occasions in the four texts when the prostitute is portrayed as a helpless character. Wallowitz argues that: 'Streetwalking may have afforded poor women a certain degree of autonomy but it did not limit them from a life of poverty and insecurity'. [62]Certainly there were prostitutes who were classified as 'successful', but the trade was very 'insecure' and good business was not always guaranteed. The women were dependent on male clients suggesting that perhaps they were not the financially independent figures

[62] Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p21

previously discussed. This section of the chapter will analyse the prostitute as a powerless character. It will concentrate on the objectification of the prostitute, her vulnerability and her inability to live beyond the trade. It will also consider whether the prostitute was an independent figure, or if she was merely another subject to patriarchal forces.

Literary critic Merryn Williams describes the typical Victorian prostitute as: 'that unhappy being who is scorned and insulted as the vilest of her sex, and doomed for the most part to disease and abject wretchedness and an early death'.[63] Williams portrays the prostitute as a pitiful, vulnerable, friendless individual, and the use of the word 'doomed' reinforces the inability to escape this fate. Certainly her description can be linked to Esther in *Mary Barton* and Nancy in *Oliver Twist.* They are 'insulted and scorned' by those around them, as can be seen by Jon Barton and Jem Wilson's rejection of Esther when they first meet her on the street: 'He swore an oath and bade her begone'. (p.116). Similarly when Nancy arrives at the hotel where Rose Maylie is staying she is given a cold reception by the staff: 'This allusion to Nancy's doubtful character, raised a vast quantity of chaste wrath in the bosoms of four housemaids, who remarked, with great fervour, that the creature was a disgrace to her sex'. (p.365). Dickens and Gaskell portray Esther and Nancy as pitiful, ashamed characters that are detested by society and filled with self-loathing. Whilst Nancy describes herself as a 'poor wretch' (p.365) Esther believes that she is a 'wretched, loathsome creature'. (p.117). Both women are clearly disgusted by their situation but are unwilling to try and change it, Esther claiming: 'It is too late now- too late', (p.153). and Nancy believing: 'I am past all hope, indeed'. (p.430). They have accepted their positions in society and will not fight for the chance of a better life, suggesting that they are trapped by the trade. Williams claims that typically prostitutes died an 'early death' and indeed both Nancy and Esther meet their ends prematurely. Esther's death is due to sickness and starvation which she is unable to prevent

[63] Merryn Williams, 'Ideology and the Novel' in *Women in the English Novel 1800-1900* (London: Macmillan, 1984) p28

because of her poverty which reinforces Wallowitz's claim that poverty continued to be an issue in prostitution. Nancy on the other hand is murdered by her 'lover' Sikes, and the violence of her death emphasises how fragile she is: 'The house breaker freed one arm and grasped his pistol […] and he beat it twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own […] shutting out the sight with his hand, he seized a heavy club and struck her down'. (p.441). Nancy cannot fight back against the brute strength of a man emphasising how vulnerable and powerless she is. Ultimately it is Sikes who decides her brutal fate which highlights the fact that she is under his control.

Similarly it is William who decides Sugar's fate in *The Crimson Petal and the White.* Although she may make insinuations and comments that sway him to make his decisions, William is ultimately the one in control of the relationship because he is the one in possession of wealth and status. Without William Sugar would not have the opportunity to leave Mrs Castaway's or the city and certainly she is aware of this, as can be seen by her panicked reaction whenever he is absent from her: 'Why isn't he here in this coach? […] There's nothing she wishes to buy except his enduring passion for her'. (p.312). Sugar cannot lose favour with William or she will lose all she has worked for. In order to keep him happy she has to shower him with praise and false compliments suggesting she is not free to act as she pleases, and he is the one in control. Colonel Leek reminds Sugar of how disposable she is: 'I give it six months and you'll be out on yer arse […] he'd fill a dirty puddle with you, to save his shoes'. (p.312). Indeed Colonel Leek's prediction proves to be correct when Sugar becomes pregnant. William is horrified by the concept and Sugar quickly changes from his adored mistress to a woman he cannot look at: 'Further discussion of this matter is out of the question. Do not attempt to come and see me. Kindly keep to your room whenever the house is visited'. (p.790). He is controlling her physical whereabouts and the demanding tone highlights his belief that she is nothing more than a servant. Sugar is disposed of so that

William can maintain his 'respectable' reputation showing how little he cares for her, and suggesting that she never had any real power over him. She is reliant on William for money and shelter, and before she met William depended on other male clients. The fact that Sugar and the other prostitutes in the novel are so dependent on male attention and money suggests that they are no different to the 'domestic' wife who was reliant on her husband. Perhaps the prostitute was not independent and was a subject to patriarchal forces just as any other woman of the century was.

As well as being controlled and provided for by men, some prostitutes were also in the power of brothel keepers, madams or 'pimps'. In 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' W.T Stead interviews a brothel keeper regarding his role: '[…] a keeper who knows his business has his eyes open in all directions, his stock of girls is constantly getting used up and needs replenishing, and he has to be on the alert for likely marks to keep up the reputation of his house'.[64] The brothel keeper highlights the disposability of prostitutes. He discusses the prostitutes as though they are cattle and the idea that they are 'constantly getting used up' implies that the women are kept in poor conditions. The brothel keeper does not consider the women as individuals. His only concern is profit and 'the reputation of his house'. That he describes the prostitutes as 'his stock of girls' reinforces the idea that they 'belong' to him and are under his control. Mrs Castaway also sees 'her girls' (p.164). as objects of profit that can easily be replaced. When Sugar asks questions about her replacement Mrs Castaway comments: 'We are hawkers in the market place of passion, and we must find whatever niche is not already filled'. (p.284). Like the brothel keeper in Stead's article she objectifies the women, and the word 'marketplace' similarly portrays them as slaves or cattle. The girls rely on Mrs Castaway to keep a roof over their heads, and as a result she has power over them. As a brothel keeper Kitty Warren is also presented as a controlling woman who makes profit

[64] A brothel Keeper in W.T. Stead, 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' , *The Pall Mall Gazette*, July 6 1885, p21

from suffering young women: 'I think of how helpless nine out of ten young girls would be in the hands of my mother! The unmentionable woman and her capitalist bully'! (p.68). When she is questioned Kitty admits that her own daughter is the only young woman she has ever been kind to suggesting that she treats the women who live in her brothels badly. Kitty Warren's main concern is her business, and the prostitutes she uses are replaceable objects that aid her ambitions. The fact that prostitutes are considered to be disposable by Kitty, Mrs Castaway and the brothel keeper highlights how powerless they were once in the hands of the businessmen/women of the trade.

Arguably not all prostitutes were owned by brothel keepers, but the women who did not live within brothels had to face the dangers of living and working on the streets instead. The city streets presented a physical danger to women who dared roam them after dark, and there was a constant risk of being raped, beaten and/or murdered. There were not many people concerned about the fate of a prostitute, and if she was attacked there was generally no investigation or punishment issued. Literary critic George Watt discusses this: 'There was little use in intervening. The victim could not prosecute. Who is she to prosecute? She does not know her assailants name and even if she did, who would believe her? A woman who has lost her chastity is always a discredited witness'.[65] Few people cared about the rights or the life of a prostitute leaving her in a very lonely and vulnerable position, and making her an easy victim for any rapist or mugger. In *The Crimson Petal and the White* Bodley and Ashwell discuss the brutal beating of a young prostitute: 'One of Lucy's admirers took to her apparently […] with her own riding crop […] quite severely beaten'. (p.144). This portrays how helpless prostitutes could be at the hands of men. The fact that Bodley and Ashwell appear neither shocked nor concerned about Lucy suggests that the beating of a prostitute was not a rare occurrence. The rape or attack of a prostitute was an accepted fact in society, and

[65] George Watt, 'Introduction' in *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth Century English Novel* (London: Croom Helm, 1984) p8

her death was not considered to be a great loss. Often the prostitute was not even given a burial. Elizabeth talks about this whilst on her death bed: 'No one will remember me […] eels will eat my eyes out and no one will know I lived'. (p.335). Elizabeth's words and her belief that no one will remember her after death highlights how discredited the prostitute was by society. A lack of family or husband may have made the prostitute 'independent' but arguably it did not make her powerful. With no one to love or care for her the prostitute was vulnerable, alone and an easy victim.

William Acton claims that: 'most prostitutes sooner or later returned to a regular course of life',[66] however many of the prostitutes represented in the texts continue in the trade of prostitution even when given the opportunity to leave it. Rather than accepting Rose Maylie's offer of reformation Nancy goes back to Sikes, and similarly Esther rejects Jem's help and returns to the street. In *Mrs Warren's Profession* Kitty is wealthy enough that she needs no further involvement, yet she continues her work in the trade claiming: 'I must have work and excitement or I shall go melancholy and mad […] no it's no use: I can't give it up- not for anybody'. (p.83). The fact that Kitty 'can't give it up' even to please her own daughter emphasises how addicted to the lifestyle she is. She may be a brothel keeper now but she is still connected to prostitution. That these women refuse to 'return to a regular course of life' implies that they cannot function outside of prostitution. Their inability to consider different lifestyles perhaps suggests that they are slaves to the trade, powerless to move beyond it.

Wallowitz argues that prostitution offered a life of: 'physical danger, alcoholism, venereal disease and police harassment'[67] and certainly it seems that it was a difficult trade to work in which presented the women with many obstacles. The prostitute was a figure who was generally very much alone in the world, which made her both fragile and vulnerable. She

[66] William Acton, 'Causes of Prostitution' p31
[67] Wallowitz, 'The Common Prostitute in Victorian Britain' p31

was an easy victim for violent men and there were no laws or security to protect her. It has been suggested that the prostitute had a sense of independence and control because she did not work for a factory or a shop like other working class women. However she often worked for a madam, brothel keeper or 'pimp' which were arguably far more ruthless and happy to sacrifice the lives of the women for their business. By choosing a life of prostitution a woman was exposed to dangers that she could not always combat, and if she did not attract male attention then she could not survive. That she was so dependent on male business suggests that the prostitute was in fact a subject to patriarchal forces and therefore just as helpless as all other women in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Phillipa Levine argues that: 'The key note of nineteenth century English attitudes was the reluctant sexuality of women',[68] which is perhaps why the prostitute caused such outrage in Victorian society. The last three chapters have explored various readings of the nineteenth century prostitute. Although 'loose women' may have been deemed 'unrespectable' and 'unworthy', it is evident that the trade of prostitution certainly made an impact on society. Stereotypically the nineteenth century prostitute is portrayed as a 'wild' woman who failed to meet both social and gender ideals. Her dress was flamboyant, her character feisty, her temper passionate and her streetwise knowledge was something that no 'respectable' woman would dare possess. The prostitute was an outcast and as a result was either pitied or loathed. This dissertation has attempted to look beyond this stereotype by considering the prostitute as maternal and powerful.

Oliver Twist and *Mary Barton* were both written in the nineteenth century by reformists who wished to gain sympathy through their work. When first reading the texts, Esther and Nancy are portrayed as quite pitiful and helpless. When analysed further however it is clear that the texts surpass the stereotype of the prostitute by presenting the 'fallen' women as heroines. Michael Slater claims that: 'Nancy transcends the role of prostitute'[69] and indeed both Esther and Nancy are presented in a far more positive light than the 'sinful, temptresses' that Victorian society believed roamed the streets. Esther and Nancy are passionate women with maternal instincts, and it is their passion and willingness to act on these instincts that ultimately makes them more powerful than the stereotypical idea of the prostitute. Although Esther and Nancy may be heroines however, they are still met with the traditional early death of the 'fallen' woman, and they do not consider themselves powerful

[68] Phillipa Levine, 'Marriage and Morality' p129
[69] Michael Slater, 'The womanly Ideal' in *Dickens and Women* (London: JM Dent & Sons Ltd, 1983) p335

but act ashamed as society would expect them to act. Arguably however Gaskell and Dickens are trying to provoke sympathy in order to encourage society to support reformation, which is why Nancy and Esther are often portrayed as helpless.

The Crimson Petal in the White is a revisionist text so the difference between the prostitutes in this novel and Esther and Nancy is immediately evident. The novel gives the typically marginalised characters of nineteenth century literature a voice. As a result the prostitute is portrayed in a way that would have been impossible in the nineteenth century. Similarly to Nancy and Esther, the maternal instinct of Sugar is revealed in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. However whilst Nancy is helplessly murdered by Sikes in order to save Oliver, Sugar saves Sophie and manages to outwit and escape from William. Whereas Nancy and Esther are portrayed as ashamed and blame themselves for their situation, Sugar detests men and claims her downfall was due to the sins of others. Faber explores the idea of 'double standards' and whilst male characters such as William, Bodley and Ashwell are represented as naïve and ignorant, Sugar is intelligent and aware. These are qualities that would very rarely be associated with a woman in nineteenth century literature. Faber also presents the idea of female comradery between prostitutes which presents the women with a sense of communal power. Faber may give Sugar a voice and qualities that are not typically associated with the prostitute however he does not represent prostitution as a life of luxury or pleasure. Many of the scenes in *The Crimson Petal in the White* emphasise the powerlessness of the prostitute. For example Caroline's story is very similar to Esther's. Like Esther Caroline has lost her child and in an attempt to save the child has turned to a life of prostitution. Whereas Sugar may be an exotic brothel 'whore' Caroline is a basic 'streetwalker', and the harshness of her life is evident through the environment she lives in. Although Caroline is given a voice and Nancy and Esther are not it is clear their situations are very much the same. Michel Faber's text may be Neo-Victorian and present the prostitute as a powerful figure more frequently

than *Oliver Twist* and *Mary Barton,* however he still considers the powerless aspect of the trade.

Chapter three introduced *Mrs Warren's Profession* because it is a Victorian text which represents the prostitute as a powerful and proud business woman. Whereas most prostitutes in nineteenth century literature are portrayed as ashamed or uncaring, Kitty Warren sees her involvement almost as an achievement. The play was written in 1893 and was first performed in 1902, which suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century society's outrage at the concept of prostitution was beginning to fade. There is approximately fifty six years between *Oliver Twist* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, and forty five years between the play and *Mary Barton* which demonstrates just how much society changed its opinions on prostitution over the decades. Although *Mrs Warren's Profession* is mainly a text that considers the prostitute as a strong, independent and controlled woman it does not avoid the idea that women only turned to prostitution because of their limited choices. This is a reoccurring theme in the texts.

In conclusion, the characters within the four texts are unlike the clichéd prostitutes typically associated with the nineteenth century. All of the prostitutes that have been studied demonstrate moments of powerlessness and moments of power and control, which makes it difficult to determine whether they should be viewed as an emblem of social suffering or a threat to convention. Ultimately the prostitute was a 'resourceful collector of the streets'[70] in a period of extreme poverty that limited the rights and privileges of women, however it is the limited choice of the prostitute which makes establishing whether she was powerful or powerless so complicated. Further investigation could certainly be made into discovering whether the nineteenth century prostitute was powerful or powerless. Researching and examining prostitutes from earlier periods would perhaps offer ideas on whether the trade of

[70] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1995) p35

prostitution improved and developed through time, or whether the nineteenth century prostitute was in fact an unfortunate victim of a particularly harsh and conventional period.

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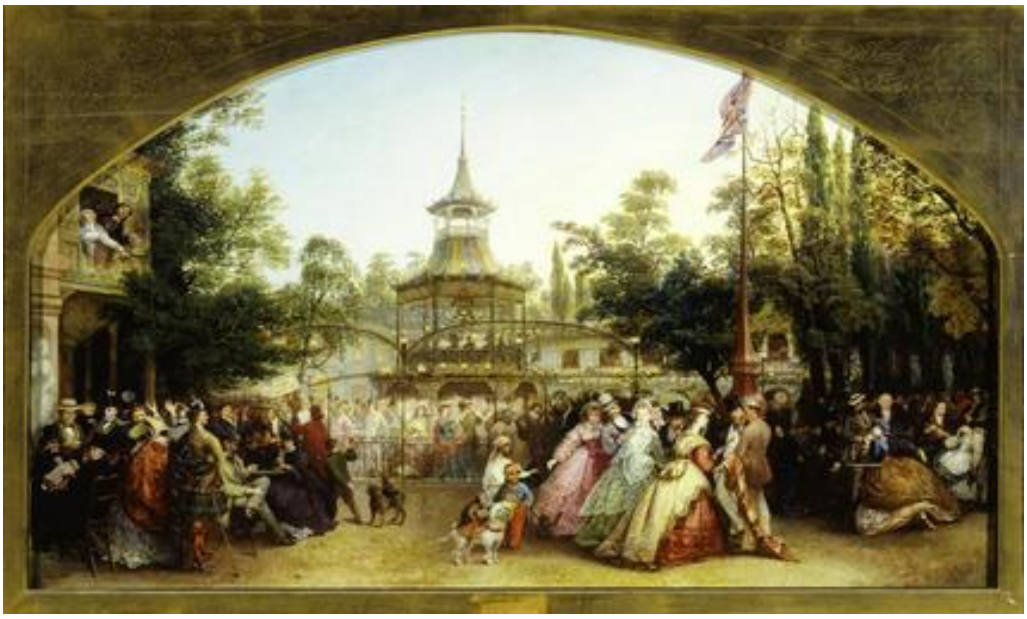
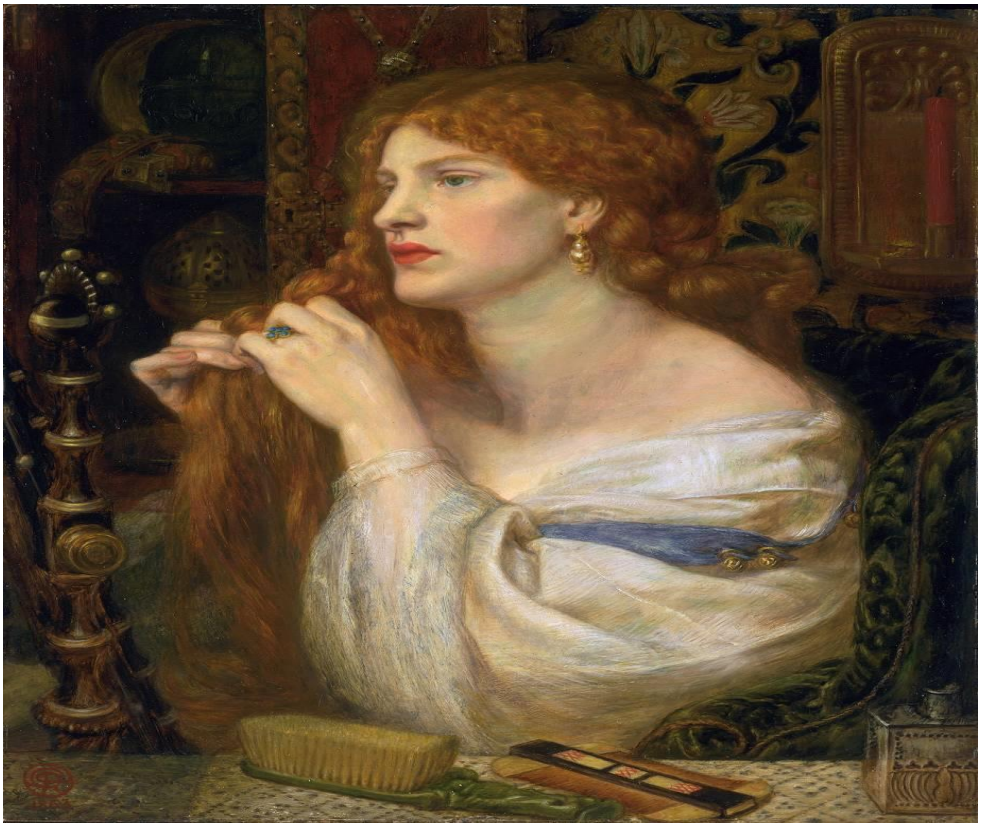
Appendices



Appendix One

Phoebus Levin, 'The Dancing Platform at Cremorne Gardens' 1864

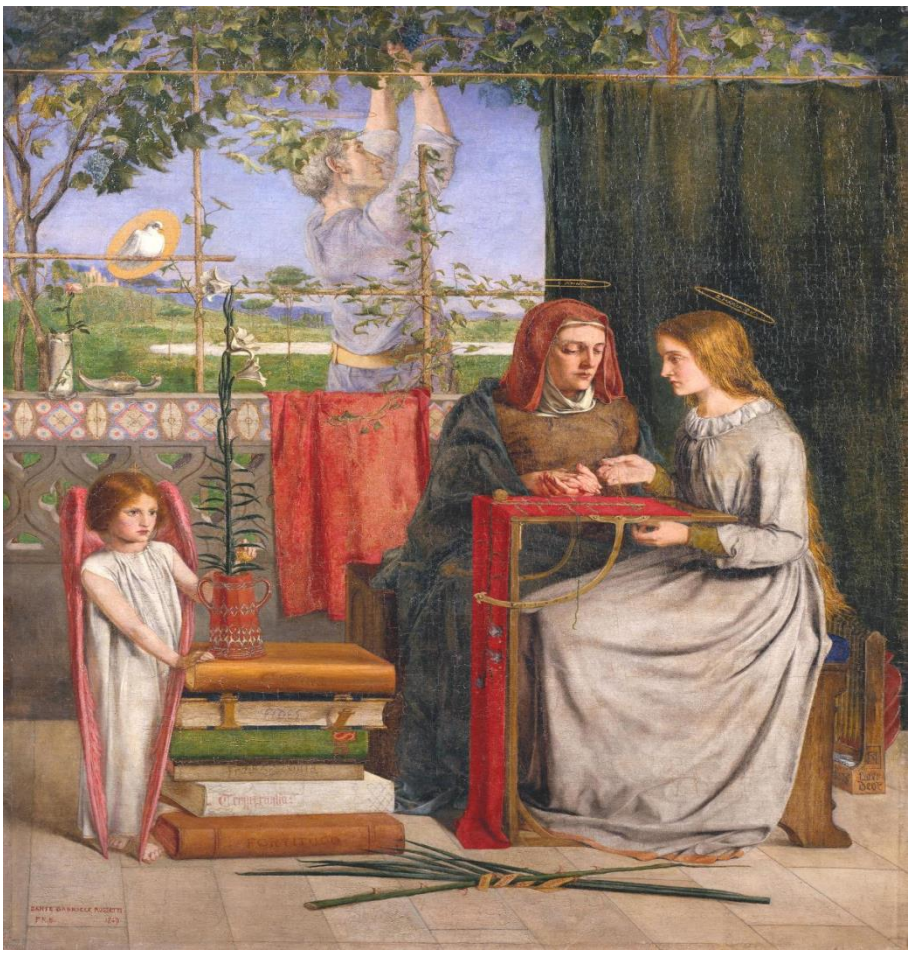
http://www.museumoflondonprints.com/phoebus-levin [Accessed July 2015]



Appendix Two

Dante Gabrielle Rossetti, 'Aurelia' 1863-1873

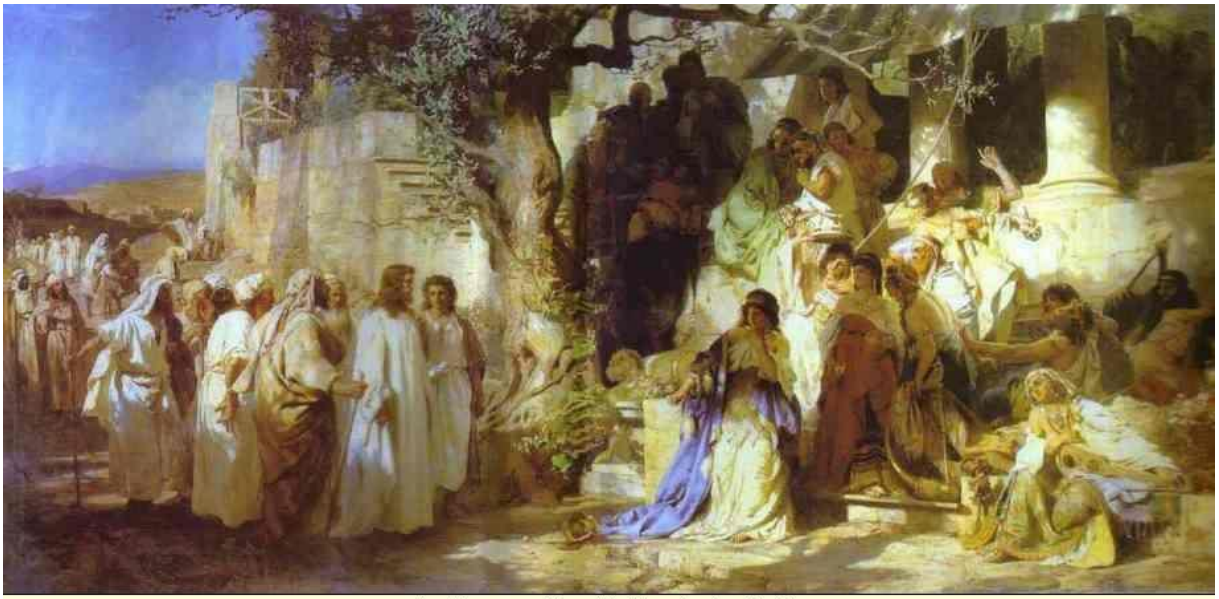
http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-aurelia-fazios mistress [Accessed June 2015]



Appendix Three

Dante Gabrielle Rossetti, 'The Girlhood of Mary Virgin' 1848-1849

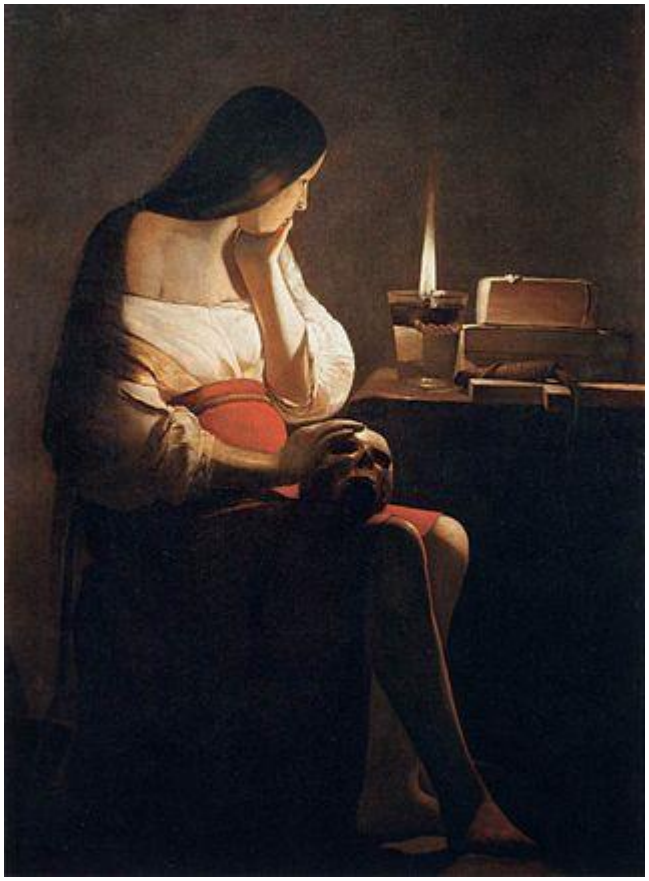
www.tate.org.uk/art/.../rossetti-the-girlhood-of-mary-virgin [Accessed September 2015]



Appendix Four

Henryk Siemiradzki, 'The First Meeting of Christ and Mary Magdalene' 1873

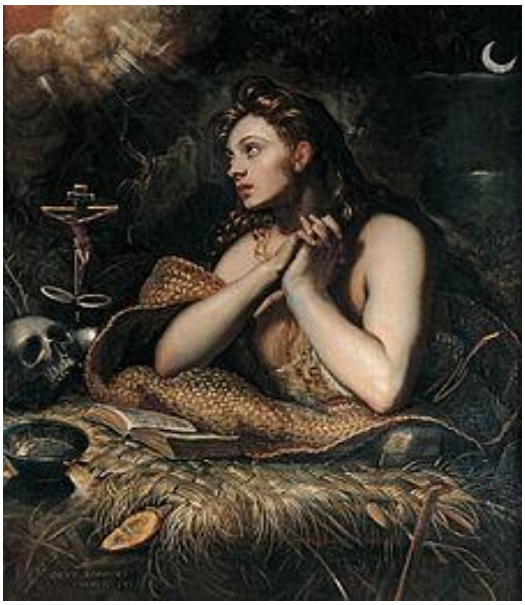
http://www.abcgallery.com/siemiradzki [Accessed July 2015]



Appendix Five

George De La Tour, 'Magdalene with the Smoking Flame' 1640

https://www.artsy.net/...georges-de-la-tour [Accessed June 2015]



Appendix Six

Domenico Tintoretto, 'The Penitent Saint' 1598-1602

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/media/thira/collections_images [Accessed August 2015]